



## Depiction of Childhood Trauma in *The Kite Runner*

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### Abstract

*In contemporary trauma studies, the emphasis often lies on the anxiety, subjugation, and deep psychological impact that past traumatic events imprint on individuals. Trauma itself is the mind and body's instinctive response to experiences that feel overwhelming, painful, or threatening, shaking one's sense of safety and leaving emotional scars that may last a lifetime. When such trauma occurs in childhood through neglect, abuse, or profound loss, the effects can be even more severe. Children who are frequently subjected to trauma often lack the awareness necessary to comprehend the larger social and individual implications of their suffering. As a result, childhood trauma tends to be internalized, gradually leading to emotional destruction and a potentially distorted future. This paper examines how childhood trauma, especially the memories of past traumatic events, can shape and disrupt an individual's life by drawing on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. The paper investigates the formative experiences of the central characters Amir, Hassan, and Sohrab, whose lives are marked by physical and psychological trauma. The narrative reveals Amir's haunted memories of betrayal, Hassan's exploitation, and Sohrab's attempted suicide as manifestations of deep childhood trauma. The study will focus on the traumatic experiences of each character and how they try to cope with their pasts, and also highlight the long-term consequences of childhood trauma and underscore the need for understanding.*

When we think about the happiest time of life, many will think of childhood. It is often regarded as a time filled with fun, innocence, and freedom. Children usually do not think about big problems. Still, this happy picture of childhood can change when they go through tough or hurtful experiences, like feeling guilty, ashamed, regretful, being abused, or witnessing violence. These painful experiences can deeply affect how they feel and think, shaping how they become as they grow older. It is a deep emotional wound caused by a very upsetting or scary experience that leaves a person stressed for a long time. Trauma is the emotional and psychological response to events that are extremely disturbing or frightening. It can feel overwhelming and make it hard to handle everyday life. Trauma does not just affect how someone feels but can also change how they think, behave, and even how their body reacts. A person who experienced trauma might feel sad, anxious, or scared all the time. They may experience problems with sleeping,

focusing, or trusting others. Sometimes, the pain from trauma can be so intense that people feel hopeless. In extreme cases, they might even think about hurting themselves because the emotional pain feels unbearable. People who have been through traumatic events often face mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and constant fear. These feelings don't just go away after the event is over. They can stay with a person for a long time, affecting how they live. Sometimes they started doing the same things repeatedly to get peace. Michelle Balaev, in a book chapter titled "Trauma Studies", says that "Traumatic neurosis is marked by the 'compulsion to repeat' the memory of the painful event with the hopes of mastering the unpleasant feelings" (362).

Trauma theory gained popularity in the 1990s. It focuses on how people cope with painful or shocking experiences, particularly how these experiences impact their minds, emotions, and memories. One of the most important figures

in this field is Sigmund Freud. His work on the human mind, especially on how people remember, forget, and react to different situations. Balaev further highlights the historical background by saying that “Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. This model of trauma indicates that suffering is unrepresentable” (360).

Freud’s ideas about trauma and memory helped shape the key psychological concepts used to understand how people experience trauma. In the 1800s, several researchers, including Freud, Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot, Hermann Oppenheim, Abram Kardiner, and Morton Prince, studied conditions like shock and hysteria to explore the causes and effects of trauma. Freud’s early work with Breuer, especially their book *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), and his later work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), continue to strongly influence how trauma is understood, especially in the field of literary studies.

When we look at history, especially up to the 1990s, the world witnessed a large amount of human-made violence and destruction, such as wars, genocides, and other tragedies caused by people. So many writers and thinkers began to explore the painful effects these events had on the human mind. They showed how trauma leads to emotional imbalance, fear, and a loss of trust in life. One key figure in this area is Cathy Caruth, who is a Professor at Cornell University, New York, known as a leading voice in trauma theory. In the early 1990s, Caruth, along with scholars like Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman, shifted from studying language and structure (through deconstruction) to focusing on trauma and its deep impact on people. Cathy Caruth’s book *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (1996) became a powerful work in the field. It helped bring literature back into conversation with real human suffering and historical pain. Trauma theory made literary studies more connected to real-world experiences, showing how human-made trauma affects people’s thoughts, memories, and emotions. The theory also uses complex texts to explain how trauma is processed and remembered. Most importantly, trauma theory brought back ethical and emotional depth into the study of literature, making it more relevant to human life. “Trauma theory thus effectively sought to reconcile the textualist and historicist approaches to the study of literary texts, showing that the perceived gap between them was not unbridgeable after all” (Bond and Craps 53).

Cathay Caruth, in her work, focuses on how traumatic experiences affect not just individuals but also communities and cultures as a whole. Trauma theory is based on the ideas

of Freud, who believed that when someone goes through trauma, they do not just remember it once; they relive it over and over in their mind. Trauma does not just happen at the moment of the event itself; instead, it is the ongoing effects and reactions afterward that cause lasting pain and difficulty. In other words, trauma is less about the original incident and more about how it continues to impact a person’s inner world. She further explains that trauma is not always fully experienced at the moment it occurs. Instead, it often returns later in life in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or other emotional disturbances. She emphasizes that trauma is not defined solely by the original event, but by how the mind was unable to fully process it when it happened. This condition stays hidden and can come back later in unexpected ways. It might show up as flashbacks, nightmares, or strong emotions. This can confuse the person and make it hard for them to feel connected to their memories, their sense of time, or even who they are. Caruth writes, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Her theory highlights how trauma can shape a person’s life long after the event has passed. It can also influence the collective memory and behaviour of groups, societies, and even entire cultures.

Building on these ideas, many researchers have turned their attention to childhood trauma too, for analysing what happens to a person’s early life, which shapes their entire future. Childhood is a time when people are still growing emotionally, mentally, and physically, so traumatic experiences during this period can be especially powerful. These experiences might include abuse, neglect, loss of a parent, or witnessing violence. Because children are still in the learning phase. They are trying to learn how to understand and manage their feelings. Trauma can affect how they see themselves, relate to others, and handle stress. The effects often do not just disappear as they grow up, but they can lead to challenges in adulthood like anxiety, depression, or difficulties forming close relationships. Understanding childhood trauma helps us see why healing and support need to start early and be sensitive to the unique needs of children. It also explains why childhood trauma is not just a private issue, but it can influence families, communities, and even society as a whole. Lenore Terr, in her book *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*, says “a sudden, unexpected, and potentially life-threatening event that overwhelms the child’s capacity to cope” (3).

When we come to Childhood Trauma, it can impact every area of a child’s development. Children may experience fear, sadness, anger, guilt, or emotional numbness. They may struggle to regulate their emotions or

develop unhealthy coping strategies. Socially, they might have trouble trusting others, making friends, or feeling safe in relationships. On the Cognitive level, trauma can affect how children think and learn. They may have difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or solving problems. This can lead to academic challenges or behavioural issues in school as well. In some cases, trauma can even affect brain development, especially if it occurs during early childhood when the brain is still forming. As well as the physical, trauma can result in sleep problems, headaches, stomach aches, or other health concerns. Older children and teenagers might take part in risky behaviour or withdraw from others. According to Van der Kolk, "Being traumatized means continuing to organize your life as if the trauma were still going on, unchanged and immutable" (53). In short, this means that when someone experiences trauma, it can affect them so deeply that they continue to live their life as if the traumatic event is still happening. They might react to situations, think, or feel in ways that are shaped by that past trauma, even though the event itself is over. The trauma feels like it's still a part of their present life, affecting how they see and interact with the world.

Khaled Hosseini is a great and talented writer and humanitarian. His writing breathes life into silence. He became popular in the early 2000s with his first novel, *The Kite Runner*, which was published in 2003. He was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1965 and grew up during a time of cultural richness and political change. These early experiences had a strong influence on his writing. In 1980, his family moved to the United States as refugees, which gave him a unique view of life as both an Afghan and an American. Although he trained and worked as a doctor for many years, Hosseini eventually decided to focus on writing. His stories often explore important themes like identity, memories of the past, and the search for forgiveness. *The Kite Runner* is more than just a story about friendship and betrayal. It deeply explores feelings like guilt, the need for forgiveness, and how childhood decisions can drastically affect a person for life. The novel follows Amir, a wealthy boy living in Kabul before the Soviet invasion, and his loyal friend Hassan. Through their story, Khaled Hosseini shows a country going through major change. The book takes readers on Amir's path from a comfortable childhood to the struggles of living in another country, facing past mistakes, and finding a chance to make things right. *The Kite Runner* also powerfully illustrates Amir's guilt over betraying Hassan becomes a deep emotional wound that haunts him into adulthood. This inner pain reflects how unresolved trauma can linger for years, affecting a person's choices, relationships, and sense of self. As Amir flees war-torn Afghanistan and builds a new life in America, the trauma of his past remains the same, showing

that physical distance doesn't erase emotional scars. Through Amir's journey, Hosseini reveals how facing one's past, no matter how painful, is often necessary for healing and redemption. The novel shows that trauma, though heavy and lasting, can be transformed into a path toward understanding, growth, and even forgiveness.

The novel showcases the trauma suffered by all three children, along with the drastic consequences had on their lives. Amir, the main character in the novel, has been dealing with trauma for many years. For over twenty-six years, he has been haunted by painful memories from his childhood. These memories revolve around a moment when he failed to help his friend, Hassan, during a critical time, leading to feelings of guilt and regret. Instead of moving on, Amir continues to live in the past, replaying the events over and over in his mind. His trauma affects every part of his life. Hosseini gave us glimpses of Amir's mental disturbance while he received the call from Pakistan regarding his unsettled past.

Van der Kolk is a prominent figure in the field of childhood trauma, especially when it comes to understanding the long-term impacts of trauma on the brain and body. His best-known book, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, delves into how the painful and traumatic experiences, especially in childhood, can manifest physically, emotionally, and psychologically. He gave significant attention to the impact of childhood trauma and how early traumatic experiences can have long-lasting effects on the brain, body, and behaviour along with childhood experiences, abuse, and neglect. However, childhood trauma is a central theme because early life experiences can profoundly affect the development of the brain and nervous system. Amir and Hassan both experience significant trauma. Hassan's trauma from being assaulted by Assef is deeply internalized, and he showcases signs of post-traumatic stress. This reflects the concept that trauma impacts the entire body, not just the mind. Van der Kolk argues that flashbacks and reliving are in some ways worse than the trauma itself. A traumatic event has a beginning and an end; at some point, it is over. But for people with PTSD, a flashback can occur at any time, whether they are awake or asleep. There is no way of knowing when it's going to occur again or how long it will last. People who suffer from flashbacks often organize their lives around trying to protect against them (79).

"That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years" (Hosseini 1).

These lines are a clear depiction of Amir's discomfort following a call from his past, the sudden moment that triggers his deep-seated PTSD. He went through a lot of problems in his life that deeply affected him and well as struggled with feelings of guilt and betrayal. Simultaneously, he did not get much attention from his father at that time. He felt jealous of Hassan, and could not bring himself to help him was a major guilt of his life. These incidents left him in a puzzled and disturbing situation. All of this stayed with him for years. In the end, he tried to make things right by rescuing Hassan's son, Sohrab, hoping it would give him some peace.

There are some aspects in childhood that matter a lot, and the love of parents and caregivers is one of them. The caregivers play a vital role in shaping a child's emotional and mental well-being. From the earliest days of life, children rely on the adults around them, especially parents or guardians, for comfort, protection, and guidance. The character of Baba, Amir's father, has a complicated and often distant relationship with Amir. Baba is a proud and strong figure, known for his physical strength and success; however, his high expectations and a lack of emotional connection mark his treatment of Amir. He seems to favor Hassan over Amir, which leaves Amir feeling neglected and unimportant. Baba's expectations for Amir are unrealistic, as he wants Amir to be more like him. Baba's failure to express love and emotional support leaves Amir feeling like he can never live up to his father's expectations, and this emotional neglect is central to Amir's trauma throughout the novel. Amir's guilt affects him throughout his life, shaping his relationships, self-identity, and actions. The impact of this guilt is felt in various ways at different stages of his life, and it is not until much later that he begins to understand how to confront it and seek redemption.

In the book entitled *Child Abuse*, the focus is upon the kinds of abuses, in which the neglect of parents is one of them. For the emotional and psychological ignorance of parents, it is said that, "It occurs when the family members of the child do not give the child proper love and affection. When the child is not provided with proper attention, the child is said to be neglected. This abuse creates a mental trauma in the mind of the child" (Dawrah 11).

As a child, Amir's guilt is a source of deep emotional turmoil. After witnessing Hassan's assault and doing nothing to stop it, Amir is unable to reconcile his feelings of shame and cowardice with his desire for his father Baba's approval. His guilt manifests in his treatment of Hassan, whom he starts to push away. This creates a rift between the two boys, despite their close bond, Amir becomes increasingly bitter towards Hassan. He distances himself from Hassan emotionally and ultimately frames him for

theft, further deepening his sense of guilt and self-loathing. As Amir grows up and moves to the United States with his father, his guilt continues to haunt him. He tries to bury his past by focusing on his new life, but he is never able to escape the memories of Hassan's betrayal and the lies he told.

Riya Pal, in her article, "The Dark Alleys that Unsettled Amir Psyche: Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*," reflects the central psychological struggle to cope with that guilt. Amir was so disturbed because of the incidents that he decided to go to his uncle's house, but the painful memories still followed him. After thousands of tries to get over painful memories, he still clutched onto the prison of shame. Simultaneously, the friendship between Baba and Ali also changed as a result of the secrets left unsaid. Both friendships show how guilt and pain can create distance between people who once cared deeply for each other (74). After betraying Hassan, Amir carries an invisible weight on his shoulder and tries to bury the past by leaving Afghanistan, by staying silent, and even by seeking the love and approval of his father, Baba. Yet none of these efforts brings him peace. "I opened my mouth and almost told her how I'd betrayed Hassan, lied, driven him out, and destroyed a forty-years relationship between Baba and Ali." (Hosseini 152). The statement clearly shows the psychological turmoil and guilt regarding Hassan, as well as the destruction of a long-term bond between Baba and Ali.

Hassan, in the novel, gives a voice to many who have suffered in silence for generations, simply because they were born into a group that society chose to ignore and mistreat. The discrimination can be seen in the novel several times by the upper-class people. The role of the Hazara people as servants is a symbol of the deep social discrimination that exists in Afghan society. This discrimination creates lasting emotional and psychological wounds for the characters, especially those like Hassan, who, despite being kind, intelligent, and deeply loyal, is always seen as someone of lower status. Hassan has always been called a Hazara, and despite Hassan's loyalty and moral strength. Hazaras like Hassan face constant discrimination, are mocked for their physical appearance, and are treated as inferior by the Pashtun people. Hassan was also denoted as "flat-nosed" and treated as a tool for labour rather than as a human being.

"You! The Hazara! Look at me when I'm talking to you!" the soldier barked. He handed the cigarette to the guy next to him, made a circle with the thumb and index finger of one hand. Poked the middle finger of his other hand through the circle. Poked it in and out. "I knew your mother, did you know that?... "What a tight little sugary cunt she had!" the soldier was saying, shaking hands with the others, grinning. (Hosseini 7)



Hassan is unwaveringly loyal to Amir, even when Amir mistreats him. His continuation of the line “For you, a thousand times over” showed the selfless nature and immense love for Amir that he wanted the attention, care, and love from him to get a slight happiness in his life. Hassan was sincere and morally upright. Despite being wronged, never seeks revenge or holds any kind of grudges. He chooses honesty even when it leads to hardship. But after the incident of sexual exploitation, he became numb and silent for a while, along he started seeking more attention and love from Amir as he started ignoring him. His initial emotional responses to the rape include feelings of shame, embarrassment, helplessness, disappointment, and a loss of trust shows how this traumatic event impacts him not only physically but also mentally. After the incident, he begins to see himself as a social outcast and withdraws from his surroundings.

Mukta et al. discuss the psychological trauma experienced by young children in the context of ethnic conflict in Afghan society in their article “Ethnic Conflict in Afghan Society and Trauma of Young Children: A Psychological Approach to Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*.” They state, “Tragic event not only affects him physically but also psychologically. After the tragic incident, he starts considering himself as a social outcast and detaches himself from his immediate surroundings. Escapism through excessive sleep is his main form of defence against the bitterness of what he has gone through. A sense of emptiness alters his self-perception” (61). When something bad happens to us, it can be traumatic. But the level of trauma increases when the harm comes from someone we trust, like a close family member, a partner, or even a friend. The people who are supposed to protect and care for us are the ones who cause the harm. That betrayal can be much more damaging than something that happens outside of our control.

Hassan, as a portrayal of a sense of emotional numbness, especially when it comes to dealing with pain and hardship. In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Van der Kolk explains that after trauma, many survivors first have intense emotional reactions or flashbacks. Over time, though, they may shut down, becoming numb to their feelings as a way to protect themselves from the pain. This numbing can be subtle but just as harmful, especially for children. Instead of acting out, traumatized children might withdraw and become distant, which makes it harder for others to see what is wrong and offer help. Hassan’s response after the assault follows this pattern. Rather than showing anger or strong emotions, he becomes quiet and withdrawn. He shuts down emotionally as a way to cope with the trauma. Hassan does not act out or ask for attention, and this emotional numbness

isolates him from others, making it difficult for anyone to understand the pain he's hiding. Like the "blanked-out" children Van der Kolk talks about, Hassan suffers in silence, and over time, this withdrawal keeps him from forming connections, leaving his future uncertain.

Numbing is the other side of the coin in PTSD. Many untreated trauma survivors start like Stan, with explosive flashbacks, then numb out later in life. While reliving trauma is dramatic, frightening, and potentially self-destructive, over time, a lack of presence can be even more damaging. This is a particular problem with traumatized children. The acting-out kids tend to get attention; the blanked-out ones do not bother anybody and are left to lose their future bit by bit. (85)

In the continuation of discrimination, abuse, hatred, and loss, the novel introduced the next character as a victim of generational violence and maltreatment of children. The same exploitation was faced by Hassan’s son, Sohrab. The trauma of Sohrab in the novel is one of the most heartbreaking aspects. He suffers deeply, both as the victim of a brutal cycle of violence that began with his father, Hassan, and due to the abuse. When we analyse the character of Sohrab’s deep trauma, it is much like his father and Amir. It is complex and comes from the violence, abandonment, and loss of parents. Sohrab’s trauma begins with the violent and tragic death of his parents. His father, Hassan, is murdered by the Taliban, and his mother, Farzana, is also killed shortly after. The loss of both his parents at such a young age leaves Sohrab orphaned and vulnerable. The traumatic nature of this loss is compounded by the fact that he is left to fend for himself in a dangerous, unstable world under the brutal regime of the Taliban. After the death of his parents, Sohrab is abducted by the Taliban. He becomes a victim of the brutal regime, and he suffers both physical and psychological abuse. This period of imprisonment is deeply traumatic for Sohrab. The abuse he faces leaves him scarred, and he becomes emotionally withdrawn and traumatized by the horrific experiences he endures during this time. His trauma is made worse by the feeling of helplessness, as there's not much he can do to escape or fight against the terrible things happening to him. One of the most harrowing moments of Sohrab's trauma occurs when he attempts suicide after he is rescued by Amir. "I pushed the door open. Stepped into the bathroom. Suddenly I was on my knees, screaming. Screaming through my clenched teeth. Screaming until I thought my throat would rip and my chest explode" (Hosseini 314). This act of despair is a clear manifestation of the deep emotional pain and hopelessness that Sohrab feels. Having experienced abandonment, loss, and abuse, Sohrab sees little reason to live. His trauma is so overwhelming that he

sees suicide as the only escape from the emotional devastation that has consumed him.

Judith Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), discusses the impact of trauma on individuals, particularly in the context of childhood abuse and its long-term effects on mental health. She emphasizes the devastating impact of childhood trauma, especially in cases of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. Herman explains that trauma can lead to complex psychological issues, including depression, anxiety, and a distorted sense of self, all of which can contribute to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. She highlights how the effects of trauma can interfere with a child's ability to develop healthy coping mechanisms and relationships. The sense of powerlessness and helplessness often experienced by traumatized children can contribute to suicidal ideation, as they may see death as a way to escape the overwhelming pain of their experiences. She showed the connection between early traumatic experiences and later suicidal tendencies, particularly in individuals who struggle with unresolved trauma and lack adequate support or healing (67).

Sarah O'Brien, in the essay entitled "Translating Trauma in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*," mentions that following this confession, it is decided that Amir and Soraya should adopt Sohrab, Hassan's son, and bring him to the United States to live. The adoption process proves difficult, however, and Sohrab is further traumatised as a result of his frustrations. Unable to cope with the prospect of returning even briefly to an orphanage before the adoption can be completed, Sohrab attempts suicide and narrowly escapes death (10).

This emphasizes the extent of his internal suffering and how deeply trauma can affect one's ability to cope with life, leading to feelings of being utterly helpless and overwhelmed. Even after Amir takes Sohrab to the United States, Sohrab's trauma does not simply disappear. The emotional scars from the abuse and loss he experienced in Afghanistan remain, and he struggles with depression, trust issues, and an inability to fully heal. The psychological damage he suffers from the events in his past continues to affect his relationships with those around him, including Amir. His trauma shapes his character and makes it difficult for him to open up and find peace. Sohrab's trauma is a result of the devastating impact of war, violence, and loss on a young, innocent child. His life is marked by a series of tragic events that leave him emotionally broken. His life also highlights the generational cycles of trauma that are passed down, showing how the suffering of one generation can haunt the next. Through Sohrab's journey, the novel explores themes of redemption, forgiveness, and the long

road to healing, as Amir makes efforts to repair the damage for his past mistakes and help Sohrab to find peace.

In *The Kite Runner*, childhood trauma deeply shapes the personalities of Amir, Hassan, and Sohrab and shows how they developed later. Their painful pasts affect them so badly that their perspectives change, how they see themselves, their relationships, and whether they can ever find peace. The novel shows that childhood trauma, like guilt and shame, can hold people back, but it also offers a message of hope. Healing is not easy, but by facing their pasts, taking responsibility, and showing compassion, the characters find a way forward. Even though trauma does not disappear completely, the story suggests that growth and redemption are possible when they break the silence and seek forgiveness.

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